



## COMMUNITY LEARNING CENTERS

**Dr. Wayne Jennings**



## ABSTRACT

The Community Learning Centers plan provides a systemically changed model for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This top-to-bottom transformation of current education addresses all aspects of schools with a detailed framework to guide serious educational reformers. This fresh approach to principles of learning, curriculum, staffing, facilities, student as resource, parent roles, technology, staff development and more makes it possible to accomplish for all students the three major goals of education: responsible citizenship, productive work and lifelong learning. Generated with a large grant and based on sound research, the Community Learning Centers program gives courageous school and community leaders the background and practical information to create high performance schools.

This essay was first published by Lawrence Elbaum Associates, Inc., 10 Industrial Avenue, Mahwah, NJ 07430-2262 as a chapter in ***Bold Plans for School Restructuring*** edited by Sam Stringfield, Steven Ross and Lana Smith, 1998.

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## INTRODUCTION

Community Learning Centers are a comprehensive, top-to-bottom school redesign to dramatically increase learning by all students. As such, the design is complex and exacting to implement in its entirety, given long-standing school traditions, beliefs and policies. It is our conviction that only a systemic model for school change will raise American education to the level required for a sophisticated democratic society and the rapidly changing world of the 21st century.

In the past most of the changes installed in schools did not last even when they were proven effective

practices. In one of the most telling reports, Nachtigal (1972) and other researchers visited sites where the Ford Foundation over the period of a decade had made Acomprehensive school improvement@ grants totaling \$30 million. They found little remained of the promising efforts to reform education. This same dismal finding emerges from the billions of government and foundation grants dollars spent on school reform during the past two decades. The problem: the rest of the system in which the school resides did not accommodate the innovation.

Most institutional change is piecemeal and fragmented. Educators toil to bring about changes in the present system of education, and while many have

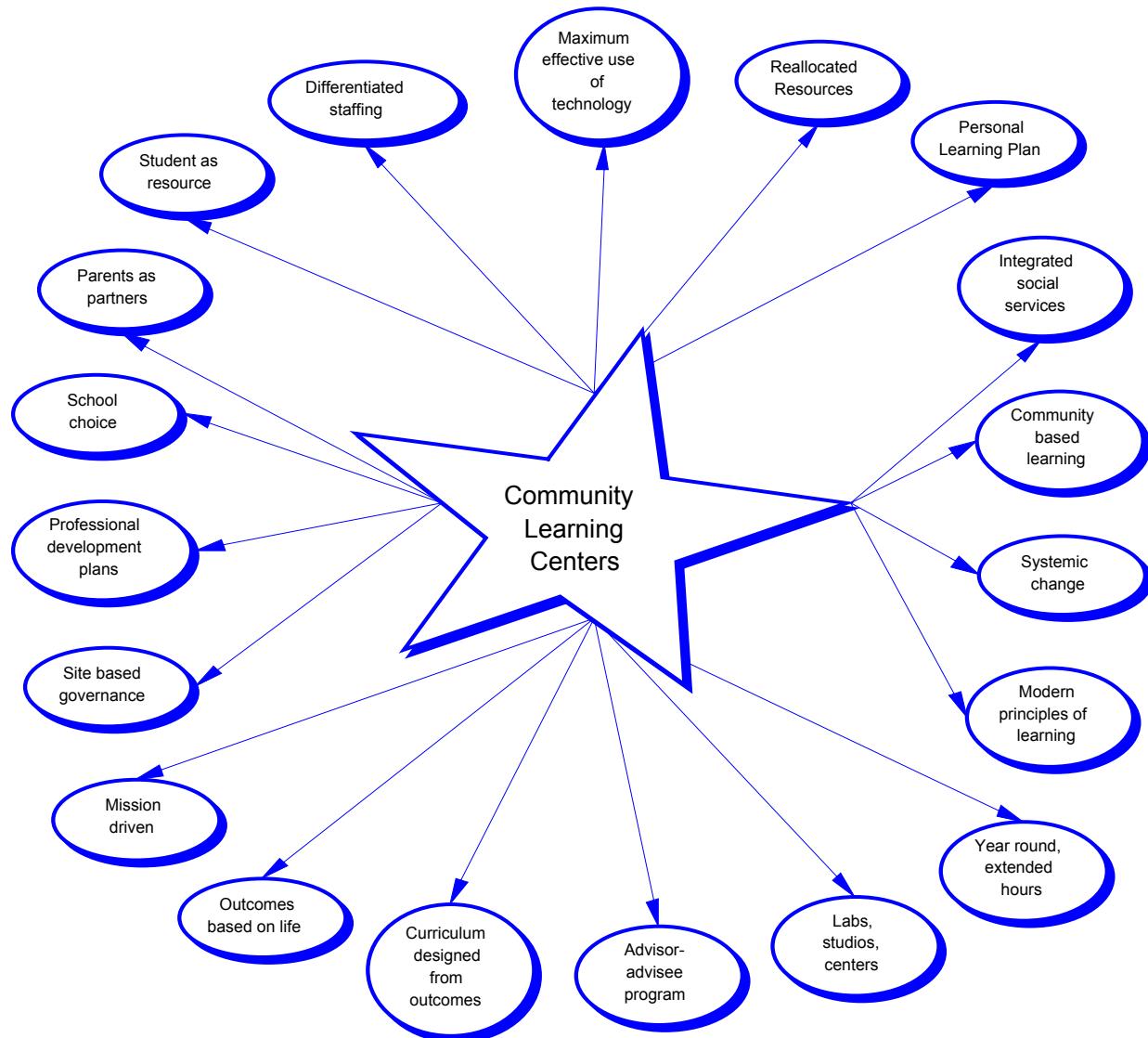


Figure 1: Community Learning Centers Features

succeeded introducing new practices; in most cases, the innovation withered or disappeared without a trace. We don't disparage this type of incremental change as many organizations develop this way. For most schools, incremental efforts do not yield lasting or fundamental change. Instead, they give an illusion of progress through a facade of activity. According to Sizer (1983), most of the problems that beset education ...are obvious, well understood, and of long standing. Educators and their critics have been rhetorically hammering away at them for several decades. It is the remedies that seem problematic. None seems to stick. Why? Things remain the same, because it is impossible to change very much without changing most of everything. The result is paralysis."

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The Community Learning Centers design is a systemic change model because it addresses the major aspects of schooling: staffing, instructional methods, learning, curriculum, allocation of resources, technology, parental roles, training, governance, outcomes, assessment, and partnerships (see Figure 1 for an overview). In addition, the design confronts the suffocating barriers to institutional change with the mechanisms of choice, contracts, and charters. The design probably best fits charter schools or school districts that consciously and deliberately choose to make major advances in one or more of their schools. However, most districts work at incremental change and are unable to accept systemic change for political or other reasons.

The Community Learning Centers design was created during the New American Schools Phase I (a national effort to reinvent American education) by a team of researchers and practitioners at Designs for Learning, a school transformation consulting firm in St. Paul, Minnesota. Once the design was published, the team solicited interest for implementing the design for New American Schools Phase II. Over 80 preliminary proposals were received from throughout the nation.

These were winnowed to the 21 strongest and a team from each was funded to attend a day and a half conference to review what was involved in preparing a final proposal on comprehensive school change. As requested, each team attending the conference included school staff, parents, community members, and students, if possible.

The teams were told of the complexities of implementing the design. This was done in the spirit of full disclosure and to reduce the carrot factor of participating primarily to obtain the funding. Their submission of a final proposal would be judged, in addition to the usual criteria, on the diversity of the team preparing the proposal and degree of community support for their plans. Twenty proposals were received and ten were chosen as Community Learning Centers sites. At about that time (spring, 1993) the New American Schools ran into funding problems and was unable to assure teams of the implementation phase. This meant the Community Learning Centers sites could not be told if they should proceed. As a result, sites were unable to shape budgets and staffing for the new design during the normal time of year for finalizing budgets and notifying staff about the following year's employment. The massive amount of training planned for the summer preceding fall implementation to prepare staff, parents, and community was scrapped. In addition to the delay in supporting Phase II, the expected level of funding was cut 60 percent. The number of sites was reduced to seven, all in Minnesota to save on transportation and other costs.

The final school sites were diverse: urban, rural, tribally controlled, charter and conventional schools. Training took place as the year progressed, somewhat akin to repairing an escalator while the progress of the schools. Some were new charter schools with inexperienced staff hired just weeks before school began. The new staff at the sites had virtually no knowledge of CLC specifications. It took a major effort to bring everyone to a state of understanding the CLC design and then to confronting the issues of implementing the design. During the second year, an evaluation firm was employed to visit all sites and conduct a careful appraisal of:

1. How well the design had been implemented.
2. The feasibility of the design as viewed by stakeholders at each of the sites.
3. Student performance data.

The evaluation report found some sites had made excellent progress at implementing the CLC design and that all sites, in general, found the design feasible. Problems were found in differentiating staff in one



Students learn to navigate and find information in Times Square, New York City

school because of union issues, and in another, small rooms limited an increase in class size. Other difficulties included lump sum budgeting in conventional school districts, the freedom to select appropriate and remove inappropriate staff in conventional schools districts, a reluctance to substantially reallocate budgets differently, and the issues around integrating community social services. Sites also reported that teachers and aides had considerable inertia in making the many paradigm shifts inherent in the design. For example, the design called for basing curriculum at least in part on student questions about themselves and society. With few exceptions, teachers found this outside their training and experience. These problems were not unexpected by the CLC design team who felt that the lack of initial training and the less than two years for implementation were inadequate for most of the sites to implement the complex design.

The Community Learning Centers design is intended - to cost no more than conventional schools beyond a startup amount for training and technology of about \$200,000 for a school of 500 students. Beyond this, costs of the design were to be reallocated within the school budget by changing many of the usual expenditure items. For CLC sites, this required building a base of understanding about school revenues and expenditures and an unwavering commitment to the bottom line of student growth versus protecting past practices and positions.

A number of schools use the design or many elements of the design. One, New Country School, has become nationally famous and has received substantial foundation funds to replicate its program. Other schools are vigorously pursuing the goal of preparing all students for their roles as responsible citizens, productive workers, and lifelong learners.

## KEY ELEMENTS OF THE DESIGN

The following principles and elements define the Community Learning Center design and guide its approach to reinventing American schools:

1. Community Learning Center sites represent systemic or comprehensive change. All assumptions about education are open to examination toward the end result of greater student growth by all youth and the establishment of the Centers as headquarters for lifelong learning in their communities.
2. Each Community Learning Center site must negotiate with the local governance authority to become a charter or contract school in order to overcome barriers to systemic change. Community Learning Centers can be organized as charter schools (provided for in many state statutes) or the equivalent (as provided by authority of the state superintendent in some states or under tribal governance) or as a tightly drawn contract between the Center and the school district. The contract authorizes broad site decision-making powers in the areas of program, staffing, and budget. Each Center must have the local, state, and federal revenues its students earn and the authority to shape the program, staffing, and budget to accomplish its mission and organization.
3. Community Learning Centers have well articulated missions, beliefs, and assumption statements to guide their development. The foundation of these statements lies in increased growth of all students.
4. Standards for attainment of major outcomes must be of a caliber that exceeds traditional levels in preparing students for their major roles in a complex, changing society. Assessment of achievement is in part embedded into daily work and evaluated through competency expectations, exhibitions,

portfolios, or presentations, and checked against community expectations.

5. Curriculum is designed from outcomes. Sites design powerful learning experiences that assure development of skills, knowledge, and attitudes for success as citizens, workers, healthy individuals, and lifelong learners. Curriculum is defined as all the learning experiences of the student irrespective of place, time, or person.
6. Learning experiences are based on modern learning principles and are student-centered, experiential, life-centered, and brain-based that is, compatible with the power of the brain to assimilate and organize learning.
7. Each learner has a Personal Learning Plan (PLP) in which goals, experiences to reach goals, and progress toward goals are recorded. The PLP defines each student's schedule of learning activities. Each learner has an advisor who meets periodically with the learner and parent to build and review the PLP. Computer software aids in recording the PLP goals and activities.
8. Resources are reallocated to accomplish program ends. More is spent on instructional materials, instructional equipment, field trips, staff development, and community-based learning than in most schools. Large technology expenditures are capitalized over time. School budgets are lump-sum based and include all revenues students earn from all sources.
9. Community Learning Centers elevate the position of teachers to facilitators of learning with a variety of support staff to augment the work of teachers for specialized functions. Teacher productivity is increased with the assistance of paraprofessionals, clerks, technology specialists, community resource linkers, volunteers, and students themselves. Staff is compensated on the basis of responsibility, skill, productivity, and other factors. Staffing includes: parents, community resource people (citizens, seniors, business employees, agency staff) and students. All teachers agree to three fundamental roles: teaching, advising, and participating in
10. Staff development occurs with the equivalent of 20 to 30 days a year, every year. Staff development is based on a Professional Growth Plan each staff member maintains stating goals, strengths, areas for improvement, professional growth activities, and progress reviews.
11. Maximum effective use of technology empowers learners and staff. All students routinely use word processing, e-mail, Internet research, graphics, and spreadsheets. Many use desktop publishing, multimedia, databases and other programs.
12. Students are viewed as powerful resources and become an integral part of staffing. Their active participation in decisions about the school and ownership of their learning contributes to cognitive development and adds a considerable measure of deep connection to the school. Their contributions of ideas and



Students plan and do week-long camping trip to Whitewater State Park.

actions increase the pool of creative thinking for problem solving and their school service responsibilities lighten the work load for all.

13. Stakeholders, defined as those affected by decisions, participate in making key decisions about program, staffing, and budget. Teachers make curriculum decisions and are accountable for student learning outcomes. Decisions are data-based and checked against outcomes and results.

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14. The program vigorously involves parents in their child's education in several ways: participating in student-advisor conferences for goal setting; sharing personal and occupational expertise and experiences; providing home-based learning reinforcement, and participating in governance. Ideally, the program assists parents with the development of family learning plans.

15. Partnerships with other units of government, public and private agencies, early childhood programs, and post-secondary education are maximized to share community resources, reduce fragmented services, and reduce duplication. Social services are integrated with education through agreements for collaborative services and shared costs, revenues, and location.

16. Program choice is provided to students and parents. No one is required to attend or work at the Community Learning Centers. Parents and staff have the option of conventional programs. Options solve the common problem encountered in school change, that of parents and staff who tried to restore the traditional

program. Without an exit choice, they almost always succeed.

17. Community Learning Centers are headquarters for lifelong formal and informal learning for the entire community. As such, they are open year round with extended hours (24 hours a day electronically). Richly stocked collections of learning materials are available on site or electronically for all ages. The costs of this feature are defrayed with community education programs, shared staff, and by expanded definitions of the school day and what constitutes faculty.
18. CLCs support active learning environments such as media centers, production studios, discovery centers, theaters of learning, labs, community-based learning, technology access and work stations for students rather than typical double-loaded corridors of classrooms. The learning environment must be inviting, convivial, and accessible to the community.

19. Support mechanisms must be in place to sustain change such as: funding stability, broad site based decision-making authority, feedback on progress, and staff recognition, and community celebration. Attention must be paid to staff mental health to increase productivity and to avoid burnout and stress that so often accompanies ambitious change labors.

Certainly, this is a challenging list of changes. Many of these features won't work or don't make sense without a systemic view. Most of the 19 items are a system themselves within the systems of a school. Most have proven themselves in limited settings but have not endured or flowered because the remainder of the system did not accommodate the innovation. It's as though a 1940 model Remington typewriter was being improved incrementally with a motor, a type wheel, and a correcting ribbon. On such a course, the typewriter will never be a word processor. What makes this design compelling is that it addresses all aspects of school operation, thereby standing a chance of creating real enduring reform and of substantially boosting achievement of all students. The design team believed that schools will not achieve the breakthroughs thought necessary to raise all students' achievement without a systemic approach. The history of school reform doesn't support piecemeal and incremental change sufficient to produce the change

necessary to reach all youth and to adequately prepare them for citizenship, work and lifelong learning.

## VISION, MISSION AND BELIEFS

The following basic beliefs about learning govern Community Learning Centers. These ideals furnish a foundation for building the program and procedures.

### Mission:

*All learners will enjoy school and will become effective people and responsible citizens.*

### Basic Beliefs:

- Students are talented, precious and special.
- Differences are to be prized and supported.
- Students are eager, curious learners.
- Parents are indispensable partners.
- Staff care deeply about providing a high quality program.
- Learning means active engagement, exploration and inquiry.
- Schools control the conditions for learners' successes.
- Schools strive for continuous improvement.

### Absolutes:

- Choice of programs is provided to staff and students.
- Inappropriate staff are moved from the program.
- Decisions about program, staffing, and the total budget are made by program stakeholders.

Educational innovation is often short-circuited by a failure to follow up or to determine the implications of the noble statements above. To maintain the momentum of reform efforts, Community Learning Centers confront the following questions:

- What usual school practices violate our beliefs and must, therefore, be discontinued?
- What present practices support our beliefs and should be continued or extended?
- What new practices must be initiated to support the beliefs?

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

The learning outcomes at Community Learning Centers focus on bringing students to a high level of competence as workers, citizens, family members, and lifelong learners for a complex, diverse, and rapidly-

changing society. Learning outcomes must be explicit, meaningful, and measurable to students, parents, and the community.

- **Explicit** means that students and parents understand the outcome and are able to gauge their status in relation to it, knowing precisely what remains to be learned.
- **Meaningful** means that students and parents see the sense of the outcome, recognize it as valuable for life, and accept the challenge of accomplishing it.
- **Measurable** means staff, students, and parents understand the criteria and assessments used to determine progress toward outcomes and know when a performance standard has been met.



A student enjoys fulfilling a service learning assignment by working with an elder at a community center.

The outcomes take the form of complex behaviors or roles. These four suggested outcomes require that each student become a:

- Responsible citizen
- Productive worker
- Self-directed lifelong learner
- Creative, healthy individual

After a school and its community have established their major outcomes, each is expanded with a definition and more specific outcomes. For an example of this next step, consider the outcome, **productive worker**. The Department of Labor in a significant publication SCANS (1993) described the expectations by employers for employees at all levels of compensation. Figure 2 shows their condensed list.

## A THREE-PART FOUNDATION

**Basic Skills:** Reads, writes, performs arithmetic and mathematical operations, listens and speaks

**Thinking Skills:** Thinks creatively, makes decisions, solves problems, visualizes, knows how to learn, and reasons

**Personal Qualities:** Displays responsibility, self-esteem, sociability, self-management, and integrity and honesty

## FIVE COMPETENCIES

- **Resources:** Identifies, organizes, plans, and allocates resources
- **Interpersonal:** Works with others
- **Information:** Acquires and uses information
- **Systems:** Understands complex inter-relationships
- **Technology:** Works with a variety of technologies

**Figure 2: Worker Competencies**

The outcomes apply at any grade level and provide a framework for developing curriculum. Most teachers at the fifth grade would desire students to have or be developing all of these competencies and could plan learning experiences to aid students to grow in these areas. Note that the fundamental and traditional areas of reading, writing and math remain as important contributing outcomes. They are essential “supporting” outcomes to the ultimate purposes of becoming a productive worker. Thus, they attain greater importance for their relevance and meaningfulness.

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## Assessment

Creating challenging standards for outcomes requires at least three important steps.

1. Stakeholders establish a short list of clear outcomes related to life roles. For example, the five outcomes listed above.
2. Stakeholders define the outcomes by elaborating on their meaning. For example, use the SCANS material to elaborate the productive worker outcome. Even this level requires further detailing.
3. Establish expectations or standards for each item. For example, define a level of speaking competence before a group that certain age students are expected to achieve.

Expectations or standards help transform assessment from strictly a norm-referenced to a criterion-referenced measurement. For example, staff might expect 12 year-olds to be able produce a school newsletter using desktop publishing and meet predetermined standards of clear expression and grammatical correctness. The primary modes of assessing student attainment of learning outcomes are performance based tasks, portfolios, and demonstrations or exhibitions of competence. To the extent that they are useful or required, state or national performance assessments can be used.

Other areas of student assessment include: teacher observations, student self-assessment, and work samples. The Centers also obtain valuable data for program decision-making through such data as: parent and student satisfaction surveys, attendance and graduation rates, numbers and types of books read, behavior reports, and service learning reports.

## CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

### Modern Principles of Learning

The educational approach is brain-compatible. This means learning is compatible with how the brain operates. Essentially, learning accelerates with large amounts of input and with many opportunities for students to learn by doing, inquiring, and discovering. Learning must be active, engaging, and immediately applicable. Brain-based learning is a systems approach and encompasses practices known to advance permanent learning.

Leslie Hart (1999) developed a theory of human learning and popularized the term Abrain-based@ learning that outlined four basic building blocks of the brain=s functioning:

- 1. Patterns or understandings.** Patterns are structures in the brain that represent recognition or understanding. Patterns develop from experience, most efficiently in a rich and stimulating environment that contributes large amounts of input to the brain.
- 2. Programs or instructions.** Programs in the brain enable one to act, for example, to: walk or jump, button a shirt, solve problems, or to speak or write the word Ahot. Speaking, for example, requires a massive number of instructions from the brain to facial muscles, vocal cords, tongue, and other regions of the body. Programs are learned largely through trial and error, with refinement through practice. Humans develop and deepen thousands, perhaps millions, of programs through the reinforcement of carrying out activities many times in various ways.
- 3. Feedback or assessment.** The brain requires feedback to refine patterns and programs. In the practical sense, this means learning how well one did and receiving suggestions and coaching at all stages of development. Feedback applies, not only to physical actions, but also to thinking patterns, responses, and habits. Much feedback is constant and automatic self-assessment.
- 4. Safety and security.** The brain works best in a safe environment. ADownshifting@ is a colorful term describing the condition that occurs when the brain, under threat or danger, involuntarily shifts from a higher region of the brain to a lower (older in evolutionary time) region to prepare for fight or flight. This explains why a child needs to feel secure to learn.

## Experiential Learning and Learning by Application

To implement brain-compatible learning, use such practices as field trips and a greater number of community resource persons. Real life experiences increase input to the brain. Research shows that experiential learning and learning by application support brain-based learning. Such learning activities engage the energy and enthusiasm of youth. Other examples of brain-compatible learning activities include: participating in community service projects, working with a poet from the community, serving

apprenticeships at local businesses, preparing television or theatrical productions, researching pollution levels of local waterways, peer teaching and cross-age tutoring, coaching, using technology to find and organize information of personal interest, establishing democratic school communities, and implementing thematic curricula. Learners in CLC schools work on real products (such as newsletters or models) and services (such as teaching word processing or helping in a day care center). Ideally, the entire world in all of its richness and reality becomes part of the school campus and plays a vitalizing role in expanding the program's learning experiences.



A student contemplates Huckleberry Finn while riding a 30 foot river raft his class built for exploring the Mississippi and St. Croix Rivers.

CLC sites view the community as a gold mine of people, events, and activities for learning. Students can create databases of the deep reservoirs of community talents: cooks, storytellers, military service men and women, clergy, doctors, miners, foresters, gardeners, travelers, hobbyists, artisans, business people, government agents, judges, policy analysts, and clinicians. Such resources are the sparks that bring life to learning.

## Learner-Centered Approach

Learner-centered approaches involve attention to student interests and learning styles. A source of for this learning theory is found in the American Psychological Association (1997) publication, *Learner-Centered Psychological Principles: A Framework for School Redesign and Reform*. Here, content is made meaningful when students are involved in goal setting, determining paths to reaching goals, and appraising progress toward goals. Students,

with the help of parents and faculty, design a Personal Learning Plan. This procedure develops ownership and understanding of the learning process by students, teachers, and parents. Goals stated in the form of realistic and useful outcomes or results heighten motivation, energy, and commitment by students. Most former Aproblem@ students, when viewed through the youth-as-resource paradigm, exhibit totally different behaviors and become successful learners. Diversity among learners becomes an opportunity, not a problem.

The role of the teacher must be that of collaborator, team leader and guide, rather than boss. The teacher monitors the academic and social growth of students, leading each into new higher levels of understanding and competence.

### **Curriculum**

James Coleman (1972) points out that for youth growing up in 1900 society was information poor but responsibility rich. There were few newspapers and magazines and no television or radio. Nonetheless, youth had many chores and duties and could see a direct relationship between their work and the well-being of the family. Today's society for youth is the opposite: information rich, but responsibility poor. Yet, schools act as though this change hasn't occurred. Students are flooded with media and data, but youth have few responsibilities that clearly, visibly, and immediately benefit the well-being of their family or community. Schools who do not act on this societal change run the risk of a curriculum seen by youth and as irrelevant and out of touch with the needs of society.

In the CLC model, curriculum isn't defined as just those experiences controlled by the school. It's all the experiences of the student irrespective of time, place, or people. Education takes place in and out of school buildings, during and outside of school hours, from teachers and others. CLC sites recognize the power and educational value of family experiences, television, the grocer, hobbies, playing, travel, jobs, and other persons and activities in the student's life. The advisor, parent, and child consider outside-the-school experiences, past and present, in building a program.

A student's program is based on achieving high levels of performance toward major outcomes. Where assessments indicate unacceptable levels of achievement of content and skill outcomes, the program is modified to increase activity aimed at improving the weak

areas. For example, consider a case of weak writing skills. Imagine that the student's program includes working in the day care part of the day and preparing a stage performance another part of the day. The advisor and learning facilitator could adjust the program to include additional writing, such as, more time writing in a journal each day, work on a computer program for

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capitalization and punctuation, and a short course on writing. The decision about each of these activities would be based on the student=s needs and learning style.

For ease of access, record keeping, making revisions, and printing reports, each student's Personal Learning Plan (PLP) could be maintained with a software program. The program is used to catalog progress toward important outcomes.

The PLP yields important information about the student's progress toward performance and content outcomes. Results of assessments indicate strengths and weaknesses. As students work on projects alone or in groups, skill and knowledge deficiencies become obvious to the student and staff members associated with the project.

### **The Advisor**

Each student has an advisor and the success of the entire program resides fundamentally on how well advisors do their work. Thorough and ongoing training of staff in the Advisor-Advisee system must be provided. While many schools have established advisor programs, most fall far short of their potential by not maintaining a quality training program and following through with all aspects of advisor performance. The advisor is an educational broker,

friend, helper, guide, counselor, "suggerster," appraiser, record keeper, facilitator, expediter, and arranger. The advisor must be able to plan **with** students rather than **for** them in order to help the student grow in all areasCintellectual, social, and physicalCand to develop talents and uniqueness. This is not an easy program to establish and maintain. Much polishing of the role remains to be done to ensure a complete understanding of the purpose and operations of this program and its essential contribution to the success of the school's mission.

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Community Learning Centers require intense amounts of effective staff development because of the design's exacting requirements. Our experience is that traditionally trained staff have considerable, even overwhelming, difficulty understanding and

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**CLC sites allocate about 10-15 percent of the total budget to technology instead of the more customary figure of 2-5 percent.**

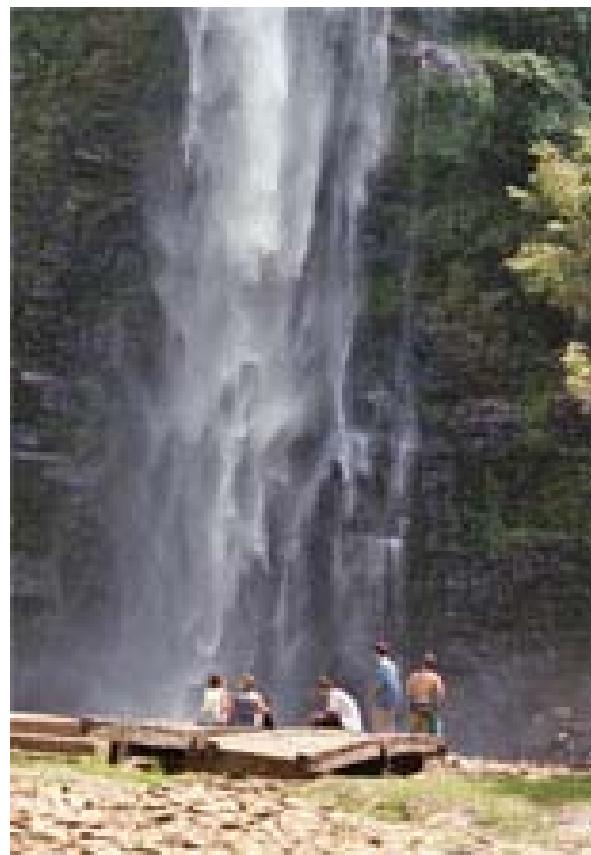
implementing the design. Often, new mind-sets and skills must be acquired. Program success will be limited without training on an on-going basis. Follow-up coaching, and data-driven feedback help discern progress and to determine what remains to be done to achieve staff competencies.

The dominant teaching paradigm is an enormous hurdle to school reform. Teachers grow up in a system of schooling that is much the same everywhere. Goodlad (1983) and Sizer (1984) found that courses, textbooks, and teaching methods are surprisingly similar across the United States in public and private schools. Prospective teachers are being trained and urged to depart from traditional practices that are dysfunctional for many children and youth. However, teachers are quickly socialized into the dominant system and discouraged from adopting progressive teaching practices by institutional traditions.

The paucity of good staff development and training is well known. Most schools schedule about five days a year which is seriously inadequate to the task of transforming schools. The challenge of training staff in better ways of organizing and delivering learning

must cope with the realities of life in schools. Staff training must be thorough and on-going at the rate of 20 to 30 days a year, forever. To accomplish this ambitious degree of staff development, consider such activities as:

- Teaming for joint planning.
- Releasing a member of the team to attend a conference or visit another program.
- Banking time so that a day of staff development can be scheduled periodically (accomplished by extending the number of minutes of instruction each day, thereby accumulating a pupil-free day).
- A periodic extended work day for curriculum development.
- Sharing videos and other professional materials.
- Lengthening the contract year.



Students travel in Ghana and explore natural geographic features and their impact on the location of towns. This is also the site of the largest butterfly collections in the world.

Each staff member maintains a Professional Growth Plan as a condition of employment and as a means of assuring an orderly progression of increasing competence. The Professional Growth Plan includes an assessment of strengths, areas for improvement, short and long term goals, plans for accomplishing goals, a timeline for accomplishing goals, and provisions for periodic progress reviews. The school's stakeholders (staff, parents, students, and community members) help evaluate all staff annually.

## TECHNOLOGY

Schools are largely in the print age, while students and the world have moved into the electronic age. This dilemma creates serious problems for teachers struggling to maintain student engagement. Problems befall graduates upon entering the world of word processing, spreadsheets, databases, and multimedia work stations where jobs go to those comfortable with such tools.

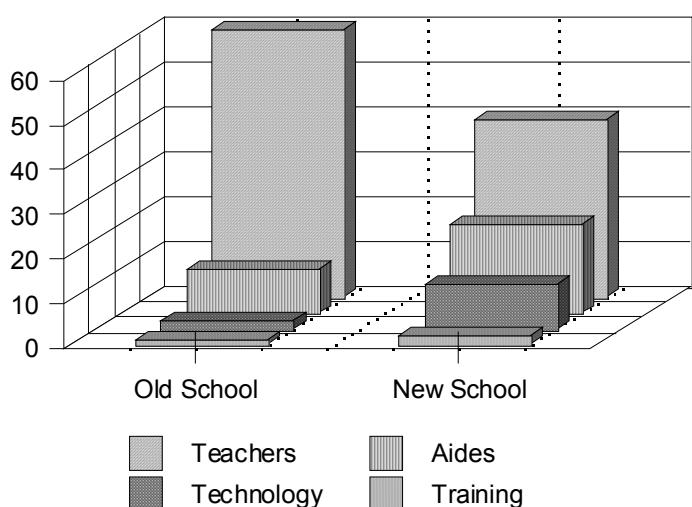
Just as the right tool in the hands of a carpenter multiplies productivity and quality of work, students and staff must be empowered with modern tools to multiply learning, increase productivity, and reduce tedious and repetitious actions. Such tools as desktop publishing, graphics programs, personal digital assistants, digitizing, telecommunications, radio, cellular, video, accessibility tools, voice to text, music software, computer-aided design, and other audiovisual devices provide for the flowering of talents and abilities.

## Funding Technology Acquisitions

Instructional equipment and materials are not a one time purchases; nor it is necessary to pay a huge outlay for technology within one budget year. A large initial investment in technology can be capitalized over its useful life, three to five years for example. Consequently, the initial expenditure can be reduced by a factor of approximately two-thirds. Maintenance costs, replacement costs, new products, training, and software must also be included. CLC sites allocate about 10-15 percent of the total budget to technology instead of the more customary figure of 2-5 percent. Our experience shows that less than 10 percent would be inadequate for a school serving under 400 students. Above this enrollment number, economies of scale operate and the 10-15 percent allocation is sufficient to obtain threshold levels of a technologically enriched learning environment.

Schools might begin by considering the sum of about \$1,000,000 of instructional equipment to enter the technology era. This level of funding will purchase, for example, laptop carts, a television studio, a short-wave radio station, an electronic response classroom [what is this—RF], a publishing center, take home laptop computers, drama equipment, science lab equipment, practical arts equipment, telecommunications equipment, and wiring. Figure 3 compares some key budget areas between a conventional school (Old School) and the recommendations for a Community Learning Center (New School). Fewer regular teachers would be employed. The number of paraprofessionals would increase substantially to about a 1:1 ratio with teachers, (at about half the cost). Technology expenditures would move from about 2 to 10 percent of the total budget. Staff development would increase from about .5 to 2 percent of the budget.

Figure 3: Resource Reallocation  
Percentage of Budget: Selected Items



To do this with usual school budgets requires proceeding differently:

- Fewer licensed teachers can be funded. A reduction of teachers makes sense only when coupled with systemic reform and won't work if all else remains the same as will be seen in the following section.
- Equipment is capitalized over time so that the cost does not fall entirely in one year=s budget.
- Leasing, renting, bonding or time payments provide means for spreading costs over the life of equipment.

## SCHOOL ORGANIZATION AND GOVERNANCE

### A New Model for Staffing

Education is labor intensive—much like agriculture was in 1890. While education is a naturally people-intensive activity, a correction must be made to recognize new thinking about how learning occurs and to provide powerful tools for learning. Maximum effective use of technology makes it possible to more efficiently allocate staff resources. There would be an essential core of the most expensive people—experienced teachers—elevated in status to facilitators of learning. Dollars would be reallocated to train and employ a greater number of paraprofessionals and provide funding for training, materials, and technology much as other modern institutions have done. Instead of being equipment poor, students and teachers must be empowered with technological tools. This is the equivalent of capitalizing employees in business to increase productivity. A CLC site could operate with a one to one ratio of teachers with paraprofessionals or close to this figure. Conventional schools have great difficulty changing even slightly from the equivalent of a 1:20 ratio of paraprofessionals to teachers.

Because typical school district budgets spend heavily for personnel—80 to 90 percent—reallocation of budget items must of necessity reduce the percentage for personnel. An exciting school with engaged students needs fewer teachers spending major portions of time explaining, monitoring assignments, and managing behavior. At a CLC, students assume important responsibilities in teaching and school operations, not for the goal of saving money—but that occurs—but to gain valuable learning experiences, experiences that schools usually deny youth in the mistaken assumption that those activities carry little learning significance.

The paradigm shift that the Community Learning Centers represent can be accomplished only if the right staff are in place. This means employing a small core of highly trained, highly motivated, and dedicated teachers as leaders. Such teachers already exist, but are often unappreciated in schools that are not involved in advanced practices of education. Teachers as facilitators of learning organize powerful learning experiences. They must be given relief from the overburden of tasks requiring less expertise. Paraprofessionals can accomplish many duties that teachers now perform and that currently take them

away from more direct, high skill tasks of organizing learning experiences.



Students study geologic features of Yellowstone National Park during a camping trip.

Because the personnel budget of Community Learning Centers is similar to, or smaller than, other schools (because of reallocating resources to other educational costs), an alternative staffing model has been devised. The student-to-teacher ratio must increase to accommodate employing other types of personnel. This means increasing the student-teacher ratio from 1.5 to 2 times the normal level. Few schools believe that they can manage such changes. Yet, some conventional schools have operated at these ratios for years.

As unrealistic as the CLC staffing specification may seem, the CLC design needs to be seen in its entirety: It departs from standard classroom models, conventional subject-matter mastery curricula, and students in largely passive roles (where constant control is very expensive). Money released by having fewer professional teachers can be allocated for various specialists to assist teachers. The design aims to produce higher achievement by all students with the same resources schools now have. It might be well to consider the present level of resources. According to the most recent Digest of Education Statistics, on average, American schools have a licensed educator for every 15 students, an employee for every 9 students, and spend \$7,500 per student. These are considerable resources which leads us to consider their redeployment. In the CLC design, teachers become facilitators of learning and supervisors of a team, a position of higher responsibility than teachers in most traditional schools.

Teachers in this program must be top professionals, experts about learning, and managers of learning systems. Assistants handle many functions and assignments essential to the learning process, but that require less training and experience than the professional teacher. Compensation can be adjusted on the basis of:

- experience,
- productivity
- responsibility (e.g., teaching, advising, participation in school improvement, organizing curriculum, and staff development),
- skill (e.g., content knowledge, application of learning principles, teaching methods, and relationships), and
- outcomes (e.g., learning results, engagement of learners, and success with all students).

A significant shift in staffing can occur when schools enlist students, parents, and volunteers in delivering instruction under teacher supervision. Kurth-Schai (1988) finds students an essential and untapped resource that must become an integral part by assisting in many functions of the school. She feels that to do less undercuts youth development and strips adults of the creativity, spontaneity and energy of youth. Because learning results from engagement with issues and problems that are real and meaningful to students, the operation of a school offers many opportunities for student involvement. CLC sites involve students with such duties as teaching, tutoring, operating educational technology, touring visitors, peer counseling, devising public information materials, building maintenance, program decision making, discipline, hiring and evaluation of personnel, and every aspect of school operations. CLC sites see students in a different light: as an extraordinary resource and an opportunity, not a problem.

### **Tiered Salaries and Responsibilities**

Salary tiers are based on degree of responsibility for the program, experience, training, and productivity. We suggest several levels of compensation for instructional staff: administrative aides, facilitators of learning, teachers, specialists (e.g. technology), and teaching assistants. The highest level of teacher is as a facilitator of learning who is an expert about learning. They arrange, organize, and orchestrate learning experiences. They remove barriers to learning. They direct the remainder of the staff in the mission of a learning community.

Facilitators of learning are licensed teachers who must be compensated well enough to ensure their full identification and continuation with the school. This means competitive salaries for this small group. The same is true for administrators. Facilitators of learning are employed on a student-teacher ratio of between 30 and 40 to 1. This is well above normal ratios because differentiated staffing involves others in teaching and tutoring relationships. The others include specialists, teaching assistants, elders, volunteers, parents, mentors, business people, agency personnel, and most important of all, students. Community Learning Centers publish student-to-adult ratios in addition to student-to-teacher ratios.

Included in CLC staff are part-time employees and contracts with firms to provide services. Contracted services may involve delivering aspects of (or even the entire learning program) the educational program as

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well as other services, such as transportation and food services. Contracted services build in flexibility. In contrast to hiring full-time employees, contracts are for just the amount of service necessary. Contract control remains with the Center, so specifications are written to match needs and renewal is based on needs and performance. Part-time staff enable the program to hire the exact number of staff needed for a particular service; for example, a specialist on China.

The program serves special education students in a rich mainstream learning environment to comply with federal and state mandates. This means less labeling, less separation by pull-out programs, and less decontextualized drill in workbooks. A licensed special education teacher oversees the program, evaluates its progress, and facilitates its services.

### **Site Management and Shared Governance**

School-based shared decision making, a form of school district decentralization, makes the individual school the unit where decisions about the educational program, staffing and budget take place. School governance involves stakeholders (principal, teachers, other school staff, parents, students, and other

community members) as participants in vital decisions about their program. To provide for the governance function, CLC sites organized Asite councils@ to develop policies, establish budget items, determine the configuration of staff, and to monitor program progress.

For most sites, these can be difficult (even agonizing, as in the case of terminating a colleague) decision areas, particularly for members used to having decisions made by the school district's central office. In these decision areas, staff, parents, students and community members can spend far too much time weighing all sides of a decision. As experience and trust accumulated, efficiencies emerge with the decision making processes, if for no other reason than sheer weariness. Participants develop deep understandings of critical school issues and a grassroots ownership that is believed will result in a long-term basis of support for systemic school change.

## COMMUNITY SERVICES

One of the continuing dilemmas for educators in traditional systems is accessing needed services for children who struggle in classrooms, not for lack of ability, but for lack of nurturance, lack of nutrition, lack of consistent support at home, family problems (unemployment, chemical abuse) and other difficulties. Standard, fragmented social service approaches have not been effective in tackling tough issues affecting children=s lives and their well-being. Social service providers, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations providing services to children and families have recognized the problem but have taken few steps toward integrating services with schools.

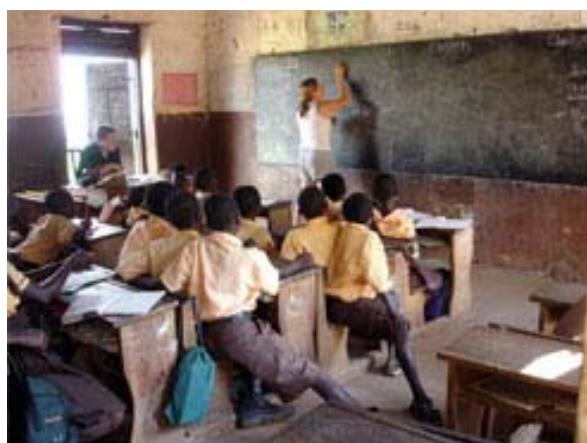
### Integration of Services

Integration of social services has been in vogue in some communities in the last few years. One site co-located programs like Big Brothers/Big Sisters in the school building. However progressive this may seem, the real challenge goes beyond physical presence and access. Even the most successful efforts at co-location do not assure access, information sharing, and true participation.

Ironically, traditional middle-class families take advantage of service integration more than those with even greater needs. Focus groups (organized by the CLC project) of parents, service providers, and community members representing un-served and under-served populations have expressed anger over

the lack of sensitivity in existing systems. Parents and community members want an active role in determining what services are needed and how those services should be delivered. Some communities of color consider the action of integrating psychological and counseling services with education intrusive and disrespectful. They express concern about confidentiality and misuse of information. Others are comfortable with these services being provided through the school.

Community Learning Centers promote and support a new paradigm for service integration and delivery. Sites work at engaging social service partners and sharing a vision of family-centered, child-focused services respectful and supportive of families and cultures. Sites approached service integration with these criteria:



A high school senior teaches a class in Ghana, West Africa about America.

- Service integration partners must share Community Learning Centers values.
- Service integration partners must work cooperatively to design services that include family orientation and respect for culture as well as creating new paradigms for service delivery.
- Services must involve a more holistic family-based strategy as the foundation. "Family" may need to be individually defined for each child.

All services contracted or accessed through Centers are required:

- to emphasize strengths, not deficiencies;
- to change the concept of client to customer;

- to move to a valued partner orientation;
- to eliminate duplication of services;
- to use proactive rather than reactive approaches;
- to work to achieve universal, not single-targeted services, and
- to honor families' culture, heritage, language and ethnicity.

Service providers must work toward greater collaboration. Most services have been at best consultative~~C~~ exchanging information periodically and often only reactively when a major incident or transition occurs. Coordinated services can remove duplication and uncomplicate processes for families and students and can involve clients as full partners in the development and delivery of services. This is one of the most difficult aspects of the CLC design to implement. It required meetings of diverse agencies in the community who were busy with their own battles of understaffing and budget. Progress must be made to see the goal of service integration as worth pursuing, though, at times, people will wish for some kind of czar to cut through the endless sessions, conflicting procedures and Byzantine diversity of organizations.

## OTHER DESIGN ELEMENTS

### **Parent Involvement in Governance**

Parents have crucial roles in their children's learning and in the functioning of the school. They bring essentially one item to the school agenda: they want a good education for their child! They cling tenaciously to this point. Their commitment is authentic since responsibility for their child's welfare is foremost.

Bringing educators, parents and students to the decision-making table results in less blaming and finger-pointing and more genuine problem-solving behavior by all parties. It's easy for parents to blame teachers for not motivating their child or for teachers to blame parents for not providing proper guidance when parents and teachers are in separate groups. The solution is to work together, sharing problems and answers while recognizing and supporting each other=s best efforts and intentions. The result is always sharing ideas and increased respect for diverse views, fundamental ingredients for the child's success.

### **Headquarters for Lifelong Learning**

By disseminating information on local community and educational services, CLC sites contribute to a total effort at a broad-based community education programs. CLC sites can compile a database of

community resources to inform people of learning opportunities for people of all ages, from early childhood to senior citizen. Formal state and local funded community education programs, early childhood, and parent education programs are vehicles for making the school a headquarters for citizen learning programs. Some sites remain open for student and community use of the computer labs and other facilities. CLC sites work at becoming a community headquarters for lifelong learning.

### **Program Choice**

For the CLC design to succeed, a choice of programs must be provided for students, parents and staff. School programs, no matter how good, attract both supporters and detractors; the latter can halt or reverse progress. Parents will cite many reasons for reservations about a new program. Some parents want the new program to mature or to prove itself. Some people prefer a *Aclassic@* or traditional education, often, because they did well themselves in such a program. Some fear the new program will not prepare their children adequately for higher education. Some see the lessened use of textbooks as *Asoft@* education and not rigorous. Some think if children and youth enjoy school, something is wrong because school should be hard and distasteful.

It would not be unusual to find that when faculty hear of a new program, particularly one that departs radically from the familiar, some will be early adopters, others more reserved and some can be counted on to dislike the program even to the point of harsh resistance or sabotage. Many a fine new program has been terminated because a vocal, vociferous minority of staff and parents made it their



Students learn science and economics by working with a high tech business and building a solar powered boat for a competitive event (which they won twice and the boat was displayed at the Minnesota State Fair).

mission to oppose the program. People do this for various reasons: philosophical differences, honest differences of view, misunderstanding, professional jealousy, etc.

Choice provides a remedy. There must be more than the new program to choose from. No one should be required to attend or to serve in the new program. Failure to provide choice can end a program prematurely.

### **The Facility**

Community Learning Center facilities need to be congruent with their innovative programming. Their buildings must be visually stimulating and less classroom-bound. They need to serve student project work (working alone or in small teams), orient outward to the world and nature, and contain a variety of work spaces. Small, medium and large group multi-purpose rooms are needed. The main activities take place in Adoing@ spaces: labs, studios, workshops, exploration and discovery centers, theaters of learning, carrels, kitchens, shops, craft centers, and media centers. There should be a greenhouse and animal center. Equipment and facilities must be integrated with community-based learning experiences, inviting to the community, and with controls for extended hours usage. The building needs to be wired for the 21st century to accommodate changing technology. Display units and walls are needed for student creations with ample storage space provided for student projects.

Few sites meet these criteria, as most are housed in traditional school buildings. Almost all can created special computer labs and can provided the wiring for networking computers or phones; some sites give classroom teachers cellular phones to avoid the wiring expense in old buildings; one site created a television production studio; two sites provided parent and volunteer meeting rooms; one site rented community space for physical education and theater productions to augment their facility; one site is housed in downtown rented storefront space which they modified into studios or learning labs; and, one is considering building a greenhouse extension on the existing building.

### **IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS FOR NEW SCHOOLS**

The degree of change from conventional practice that Community Learning Centers represent makes their establishment difficult to understand and accept for people accustomed to traditional schooling. To negotiate systemic change in a traditional school runs

high risks of compromise and resistance. Complicating the establishment of the Community Learning Centers is funding for staff development. In effect, Centers need to accelerate from 0 to 60 in a second of time. Because the agenda for school reform feels so urgent in many places, uncommon measures may be necessary.

As vehicles for bypassing school reform barriers, charters as provided by statute in many states can speed implementation of Community Learning Centers. Statutes for chartered schools reduce the number of local and state regulations, policies and contracts governing schools, thereby freeing participants to try innovative approaches without constant reminders of being in violation of the rules. Charters require learning results or the charter is terminatedCthe ultimate in accountability.

Where a charter is not available or feasible, a contract between the school wishing to implement the Community Learning Centers design and the local school district can provide many of the provisions of a charter, if it is coupled with waivers from state rules and employee bargaining unit contracts. In some cases, a school within a school becomes a unit for change rather than the entire school. The contract must insulate site staff from the usual energy-draining, time-consuming bickering with other program staff over policies, budget, and program development. Trust becomes the basis of the contract. The school board and superintendent say, in effect, AWe trust that you will exercise sound professional judgment in the execution of the program. Therefore, we will give you wide ranging authority over your program.@

### **SUMMARY**

The Community Learning Centers design addresses the challenge of increasing learning by all students using the same resources granted other schools. For the CLC design, this mission requires a substantial departure from conventional practice on almost all dimensions of schooling. The CLC design, tested in a diverse group of schools, shows great promise of being effective and feasible, though difficult to implement in conventional school climates.

For more information about the Community Learning Centers design, schools using the design, or details on implementation of the design, contact Designs for Learning, 1000 N. Hamline, St. Paul, MN 55104,

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[www.designlearn.net](http://www.designlearn.net).

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Students take on all aspects of video production in a public access studio with a program on St. Paul youth.